

## **Students say Charles Pugh wanted to help kids; accounts different than mother's allegations**



Two former students who were in Charles Pugh's mentorship program at a Detroit high school and two men who mentored its young men said Friday that allegations against the City Council president for an allegedly inappropriate relationship with one of the boys bears little resemblance to what they've seen in or out of the classroom.

"Charles never interacted with the kids in an inappropriate way," said Truevonte Whitsey, 17, a west-side Detroiter who just graduated from the Frederick Douglass

Academy for Young Men this month and said he had been in the Charles Pugh Leadership Forum at the school for most of this school year.

Another former student, 19-year-old Tevin Hill, awaiting his sophomore year at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, said Friday that he credits Pugh and other mentors in the program with helping him survive a rough freshman year at the school south of Toledo. He said he nearly dropped out because he ran out of money for books and had trouble with a math class.

Pugh, learning of the math difficulties, immediately arranged for himself and other mentors to tutor Hill via Skype, Hill said, adding that Pugh sent him \$100 to help pay for books. Hill said he worked in school dining halls making minimum wage to pay the remaining costs of books.

“My own flesh and blood was telling me I was going to fail, that I wasn’t going to make it,” Hill told the Free Press. “They (mentors) lifted me up and made sure I got through my freshman year.”

Examples like these that emerged Friday contrasted deeply with troubling accusations against Pugh made by the mother of a now 18-year-old Frederick Douglass graduate. The mother accused Pugh this week of conducting an inappropriate relationship with her son, and Pugh has been out of the public eye since just days before the allegations surfaced.

Those close to him say Pugh is devastated by the allegations and fearful for his future. Some openly doubt the validity of the allegations, wondering why the mother went to lawyers and not to police.

The mother’s lawyers have declined to reveal details about text messages they say Pugh sent the boy; she only would call them disturbing. Lawyer Ivan Land said he expects to file a civil suit against Pugh, the City of Detroit, the Detroit Public Schools and the academy as early as Monday.

Land said Friday that the boy’s mother worried that police wouldn’t investigate the case fairly because of Pugh’s power in the city, now greatly diminished because emergency manager Kevyn Orr stripped him of all pay and authority after repeated, unexplained absences from work.

Land said his clients are out for justice and not trying to cash in or take advantage of Pugh.

“That is totally not true,” Land said. “You’ll see when the lawsuit is filed.”

Legal experts said the case against Pugh has been undermined because the accuser’s mother told her story to lawyers first and not police. Detroit attorney Ray Paige said that move makes the lawsuit look like a money grab.

“The mom has a duty, not to run to a lawyer, but to protect her son,” said Paige, who has no connection with the case but has represented hundreds of clients in criminal defense cases. “The natural procedure would be, not to run to some civil lawyers first, but to go to police.”

Paige said it is possible authorities have launched an investigation on their own, although the Detroit Police Department and Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy’s office said Friday they had yet to be notified of any formal complaints or investigations in the matter.

A criminal investigation could be compromised if a civil suit on the same issue is filed against the suspect before or during the police investigation, said Michael Komorn, a 20-year local criminal defense attorney who also is not involved in the case.

“A detective doesn’t want the witness talking to a lawyer first,” Komorn said. “That’s the kiss of death.”

Komorn said it is unfair to judge Pugh now because so much is unknown.

“We really don’t know what’s going on. When allegations like these are being made, they have a tremendous impact on someone’s integrity, whether they’re true or not,” he said. “All we’ve heard are veiled generalities, nothing specific.”

The mother and her lawyers said Pugh gave the young man cash, a cell phone and clothes for prom, and that Pugh and the boy met without the mother’s knowledge off school grounds, at times during school hours, something the mother says the school district should have prevented. DPS officials say they are investigating the matter.

The mother and Land have not alleged that there was a sexual relationship.

Michigan's age of consent is 16. Under state law, however, it is a third-degree felony for school volunteers to engage in sexual penetration with a student under 18 if the volunteer status was used to gain access to, or to establish a relationship with, the other person.

Paige said Pugh's position as mentor could make it criminal for him to inappropriately touch any of the students.

"He's part of a mentoring — i.e. teaching — program. He cannot lawfully have contact with these boys," Paige said. "If there's an allegation he touched these boys, then he's got a real big problem."

Still, there were doubts about the allegations among Pugh's supporters, many of whom have been reluctant to come forward.

One who did speak out Friday was DeAndree Watson, 23, a policy analyst for Pugh who had worked with the council president in the mentoring program for more than a year and has interacted with the boy whose mother is planning to sue Pugh.

Watson said the program can be intense and personal at times, and many of the activities happen after school and off school grounds. He said the openly gay Pugh begins each year by telling the students he's gay and asking whether that would be a problem for any of them. Beyond that, Watson said, Pugh infrequently brings up the matter.

Watson said mentors attend student athletes' games, take them to pro sports events, tutor them and regularly help out to buy them things their families may not be able to afford — from clothes to lunch on field trips. Classroom topics range from professional job etiquette and the importance of succeeding in school, to proper attire and how to treat women with respect. The mentors said Pugh brings in female staffers to discuss what girls want from boyfriends — well-dressed, successful, goal-driven young men, not burnouts in baggy pants.

"The purpose of the program is to emphasize leadership among young men, particularly young men from the inner city of Detroit," Watson said, describing many of the students as from poor families, often without a father in the home.

Part of being able to relate to the boys “is not only about preparing for college, discussing academic excellence or professional etiquette,” Watson said. “It’s also important to have frank and open dialogue about issues that are facing them growing up in this community. So have discussions with them about teen violence. We have conversations about the impact that growing up in single parent households may have. We talk about the risks involved in having children at an early age. ... We’re committed to producing well-rounded young men, and that doesn’t stop in the classroom.”

Of Pugh’s interactions with the students, Watson said he “never had any reason to believe he would think about doing anything inappropriate with any of the young men.”

Land said he wasn’t surprised supporters would publicly defend Pugh and disparage his clients’ intentions.

“That’s what supporters do,” Land said.

But Watson and another mentor who has worked with Pugh for several years but did not want to be identified said they find the allegations hard to believe.

“As far as I’m concerned, he has my full support,” Watson said. “I believe he’s completely innocent. I believe he was just trying to be the best mentor he could be, and was trying to provide the support and guidance that young man needed at the time. And I stand behind him 100%.”